Caught in the Act

Elton quits—and Wembley weeps

THERE was the famous occasion when David Bowie announced his retirement on stage, but that was carefully calculated to enhance his mystique. And the equally dramatic Ray Davies "I quit" statement was so coloured by emotional stress that few believed he meant it.

But Elton John's announcement, mumbled almost self-consciously, was something else. And it changed the whole course of a concert at Wembley Empire Pool on Thursday that was already shaping up as something exceptional.

After an eminently forgettable set by China — the band formed by Elton sidekicks Davey Johnstone and James Newton-Howard — Elton arrived on his own, wearing black beret and leather jerkin and instantly was at his most compelling with an emotive performance of "Daniel."

When he went into "I Heard It Through The Grapevine", the members of China appeared as shadows behind him. Suddenly the stage was blazing with light and there were the amazing Ray Cooper going crazy on percussion in the centre and China blasting away for all their worth. The concert, and Empire Pool had exploded.

With Elton (and Ray Cooper) as focal points, China were a band transformed, and Elton — though not the absurd showman of old — was playing and singing immaculately. "Island Girl," "Candle In The Wind," "One Horse Town" and "Rocket Man" were all superb.

It was after "Cage The Songbird," which is to Edith Piaf what "Candle In The Wind" is to Monroe, that the retirement announcement came; and after a futile bout of protesting everyone sank back as Elton played "Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me." Real floods of tears stuff it was now.

Elton, however, is something of a conjuror with emotions. He launched into a blistering, mountainous finale that quickly lifted everyone from their brooding.

Into "Philadelphia Freedom" and then the spectacular climax, with flashing coloured lights, backcloth projection, dry ice, the whole bit.

It was sufficient enough by a long way to climax a memorable night, but it was a false ending. Receiving, even for him, a phenomenal reception, he came back for a solo version of "Your Song" (more tears in the aisles as he dedicated it "to all you for your support") and then brought on Kiki Dee for a passable version of "Don't Go Breaking My Heart."

And yet . . . that still wasn't the ultimate killer-diller unforgettable moment. That came as Elton left the stage and came back with Stevie Wonder on his arm.

He sat him at the piano, Kiki Dee brought him a mike, Ray Cooper brought him a tambourine, and they went into "Bite Your Lip". It lasted for a staggering, gut-curdling 15 minutes, Wonder contributing one piano solo and a few vocal variations on the chorus as Elton and Cooper leapt maniacally around the stage.

The loss of Elton John is considerable. — COLIN IRWIN.